

## Rugged and Commodious Individualism in Gish Jen's *Typical American*

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Recently, Asian-American writers such as Amy Tan, Gus Lee and Gish Jen have achieved literary notoriety in the United States with their novels and short stories depicting the Chinese immigrant response to modern American life.<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that the success of the Asian-American writers in the United States indicates a general coming of age of Asians in America.<sup>2</sup> Fundamental to this coming of age is an examination of the common and formative experiences of immigration, culture shock, and adaptation.

In her novel *Typical American*, Gish Jen explores these themes by focusing on the life of the Chang family. It is my intention to consider the Chang family's adaptation to the modern culture of the New World in relation to individualism. I have chosen to examine the story of the Changs in light of this important aspect of modernity because I believe such an examination makes lucid both the Changs' plight as well as the phenomenon of individualism itself. I will utilize the philosopher and culture critic Albert Borgmann's distinction between rugged and commodious individualism as the basis for my analysis.<sup>3</sup> It will be my contention that the husband and father, Ralph Chang, envisions himself as a rugged individualist and that his wife, Helen, becomes slowly seduced by the commodious or consumptive side of individualism as they seek to adapt to American cultural life. Due to the inherent problems of individualism, their choices place great stress on their already weakened traditional familial bonds, and these choices ultimately lead to tragedy.

The paper will be divided into four parts. In the first part I will provide a brief outline of the plot. In the second part I will consider some thematic elements of the novel pointed up by recent critics in order to place my analysis in the conversation surrounding the book. In the third part I will furnish a brief definition of individualism as well as a recollection of Borgmann's distinction between rugged and commodious individualism. In the final part I shall examine the adaptation to American life of Ralph and Helen Chang in terms of this distinction.

### I.

Although Jen's story takes up equally with the three main characters (Ralph, Helen, and Theresa) in turn, she begins her story of the Changs' rough but eventual adaptation to American life with Chang Yifeng and his arrival in the United States. Yifeng is the eldest son of a Shanghai family. He is sent to the United States in 1947 to study engineering. He is a young man of modest academic talents. He is determined to return home with a degree and "to bring honour to the family" (6)<sup>4</sup>

He is given the name Ralph by a secretary named Cammy in an off-hand way during his first semester at school. He becomes infatuated with her, but his Chinese methods of wooing her, buying her small gifts and dropping subtle hints, are misunderstood or ignored. His emotional life, already in a state of distress due to his separation from his home, becomes worsened. He perceives himself as ineffectual and nonexistent. His school work suffers, and he is criticized by his Chinese classmates, including Old Chao.

While in this condition he learns the news that, first, Manchuria and, later, the whole of China have fallen to the Communists. He is stranded suddenly in a strange land without hope of returning to his home. He imagines the worst has happened to his family. He becomes confused about his visa and his status. Instead of speaking directly to the authorities about his troubles, he follows his cultural instincts: he tries indirect communication, and this is misinterpreted as sly and threatening; he tries to avoid the bureaucracy, but this leads him further and further away from the college, his friends, and whatever hopes he still holds. Eventually, he becomes an illegal labourer.

In despair and contemplating suicide he miraculously meets up with his elder sister, Theresa. Theresa came to the U.S. with her friend Helen (Hailan). Ralph later marries Helen, and the three of them move into an apartment together. Thus, Ralph is saved by his family, and the three of them begin their adaptation to American life.

The fledgling family unit feels collectively the pressures of the New World on their household. But they preserve and cope. Ralph is given permanent resident status, and he returns to his studies. Theresa enters a medical school. And Helen finds a sense of self-reliance and aptitude for work which she never knew before in her life as a Chinese daughter to a wealthy Shanghai family.

Ralph completes his Ph.D., and he is awarded a teaching position and eventual tenure in the mechanical engineering department. He finds teaching dull, however. Helen, too, is beginning to long for another dream, another life-- the dream of a house and life in the suburbs. Their unease with their situation, despite its apparent success and hope for future prosperity, leads Ralph into liaison with Grover Ding.

Ding is a third-generation Chinese-American businessman. He is a multimillionaire who is unrestrained by tradition. Grover is thus situated to point out the realities of modern life to Ralph: "That's what you are in this country, if you got no dough, a singing Chinaman" (106). And Grover preaches individualism: "...a self-made man should always say he was born in something like a log cabin, preferably with no running water" (107). Ralph is inspired, and he later becomes Grover's pupil and business partner.

Through his association with Ding, Ralph leaves his tenured position on a year's leave of absence and goes into the restaurant business. Meanwhile, as Ralph labours towards expansion and greater profits, Helen allows herself to be seduced in her new suburban home's love seat by Grover. Ralph's sister becomes romantically involved with Ralph's former chairman, Old Chao. The centrifugal forces are held in check until Ralph learns of Helen's affair. While Ralph careens home in his car with Helen, Theresa inadvertently walks into the headlights. Theresa is hit and rushed to the hospital. But it is to

no avail. Theresa goes into a coma, and Ralph and Helen are forced to come to terms with their shattered lives.

## ii.

In the reviews of this 1991 novel, I found three themes which attracted the reviewers' attention for their significance and which I find pertinent to the analysis based on individualism: 1) the immigrant experience as a confrontation of cultures, 2) the strain on traditional familial relationships that ensue from this confrontation and adaptation, and 3) the prominent place of the dominant culture's individualism in this confrontation and its obvious impact on the newcomers.

Reviewer Phoebe-Lou Adams notes that "As long as the Changs retain their ancestral habits of frugality, industry, and scholarship things go well"<sup>5</sup> She is referring, of course, to the Changs' ability to weather the strong changes in cultural life as long as they maintain their virtues. Most Americans would take no offense with this observation. Immigrants, whether Irish, Chinese, or Hmong are often shown as models of successful economic organization and hard work. Yet, "Why would the Changs allow their virtues to be eroded into something more 'typical' of Americans?"

A.G. Mojtabai specifies greed as the factor which leads to the erosion of the immigrants' virtues.<sup>6</sup> But, although greed plays some role in the Changs' demise, the question that comes to mind is "Why would they allow their family to break up in pursuit of personal gain?" After all, greed is not a phenomenon unique to America; greed has motivated Chinese life as well. One might expect the Changs to utilize their traditional family structures as a foundation for their collective pursuit of affluence. As Jen states: "The way Americans in general like to move around, the Chinese love to hold still; removal is a fall and an exile" (61). If greed itself is insufficient to split such a traditionally strong familial bond apart, what force is strong enough to leave them ultimately isolated and removed from each other? Before this question can be answered, the specific familial situation of the Changs should be considered. For perhaps the Changs present an irregularity-- perhaps they are not "typical Chinese". If this is the case, a broader analysis of culture will not be necessary.

There is some evidence that the Changs brought already stressed relationships with them from China. The question is "Were these stressed relationships sufficient to force a break up of the family or did something in American life exacerbate the existing condition?" Patricia Storace provides evidence to show that the Changs' preexisting rivalries continued to be expressed in the United States.<sup>7</sup> But, significantly, her analysis points up the fact that once the family arrived in the United States, the rivalries could no longer be as easily contained as they were in China, and, in fact, they found a new manner of expression in the New World. It follows from Storace's analysis that only in the New World does the disharmony that existed in the family prior to its arrival in the United States become unbearable.

To make her case, Storace traces the competition inherent in Ralph and Theresa's relationship. Ralph grows up in a traditional manner, very much his father's son. Meanwhile his older sister grows up under a "paradigm of Western influence." She goes to convent school, takes an English name, plays baseball, and even strolls "sometimes with her hands in her pockets." Still, in China at least, he is the son; she is only a temporary registrant in the family book. She is labelled "a modern type" (Jen, 47). But this status only makes it difficult to find a husband and to have at least the opportunity to have a son of her own and, thereby, her own life.<sup>8</sup> But, upon her arrival in America, Theresa is liberated to some extent. Although she still finds support and comfort in the family unit, especially through Helen and Ralph's children, Mona and Callie, she has her own career as a medical doctor, and, later, she has her own romantic affair.

It is the affair that especially threatens Ralph's authority, for Theresa engages in a affair with Old Chao, Ralph's chairman. Ralph tries to cope by silencing Theresa, and as a result, she is officially ignored by the family. But, as Storace argues, Ralph also enters into "a dubious get-rich-quick partnership"<sup>9</sup> in order to subdue his modern sister. He needs to succeed in the modern fashion because his efforts at sanctioning her are ultimately ineffective. They are ineffective because Ralph has no access to traditional communal and familial bonds which would help him bring his wayward sister into line. Instead, in order to assert his dominant position, he risks competition with her.

Thus, according to Storace's analysis, Ralph seeks to maintain something of his traditional life (i.e. his gender dominance) by stepping onto the playing field of the modern world and competing directly with Theresa. This cultural playing field is dominated by competitive individualism. Storace refers to it as "romantic individualism."<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Storace does not give a clear definition of her term. Jim Bencivenga also refers to individualism as a necessity which "will never end even as it threatens the collective core of their values." It will never end because the Changs have adapted. It threatens the family because Ralph seeks to out perform Theresa as an individual, and, as a result, he launches into a dubious venture which busts the traditional family structures.

If the influence of individualism is taken into account, it must be concluded that the Changs were not destined to destruct. The family's disharmony only provides a necessary condition for individualism to take hold. It is individualism which provides the sufficient condition for the breakup. But, the questions of what exactly individualism is and what precisely its effects are need to be answered.

### iii.

Individualism is defined by the writers of *Habits of the Heart* as "a belief that the individual has a primary reality whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct ... It is opposed to the view that society is as real as individuals."<sup>12</sup> To make this distinction between world views more clear, writers often point up the differences between cultural or national groups. But, it is often forgotten that the ontological view of

society as secondary to the individual is a relatively recent development even in the West. During the Middle Ages community and family life were not sharply divided, and, in fact, they shared many characteristics of mutual interpenetration found in community based societies present in the world today. Margery Wolf writes about the easy flow of information, goods, and individuals between households within a Taiwanese village in the late 1950's.<sup>13</sup> Her general observations about interpenetration and fluidity of social life have an affinity to European village life during the Middle Ages, for at that time the Western individual was situated in a nexus of family and community not unlike a Taiwanese villager. It was not until the decline of the high Middle Ages and the advent of the modern era that the West embraced individualism.

In particular, the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke sought to extricate the individual from the bonds of traditional authority and community.<sup>14</sup> Locke's purpose was to vest the individual with fundamental political and economic rights by endowing humans with natural reason in order that the individual be free to engage his or her own labor and to act productively on his or her behalf. The anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita has argued that Locke broke "traditional thought about kinship" by his assertion that people have functions independent of the natural order of patrilineal kinship groups.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, however, the project of basing society on individualism has come under criticism, especially from post-modern critics who point to the debilitating nature of individualism as a reason to move to another more inclusive and flexible form of cultural ideology and organization. Albert Borgmann has been among these critics, and I would like to turn now to his criticism and clarification of individualism in terms of his distinction between rugged and commodious individualism.

Perhaps the most immediately accessible image of the rugged individualist is found in the Western film genre.<sup>16</sup> The image of the cowboy or gunslinger riding alone in his saddle is seen by millions of people around the world. (I have seen several Westerns on local T.V. during my three year stay in Taiwan). In nearly every Western, Americans and others can revisit the conquest of the American West. One can admire the heroic efforts required by the early pioneers to subdue the wilderness and to stave off bandits and encroaching corporations. Although the genre surely presents an overly romanticized version of the rugged individualist, Americans remain fond of revisiting this image and of characterizing themselves in such a way. They see themselves as capable of standing up to the dangers and demands of nature and corruption just as did the pioneer and the cowboy. Borgmann recognizes the ambiguity and irony of this cultural trait, however. He notes that while Americans celebrate the rugged founders of great corporations and while Americans hail the brilliance and productivity of entrepreneurship, the great corporations eventually come to be run by anonymous and ultimately replaceable managers. The managers are far from unfettered, and while they may be believers in the mythology of the self-made man, decisions come by continuous persuasion and communication, rather than by single-minded initiative.<sup>17</sup> While anonymous managers are running large corporations, entrepreneurs depend on their social networks for information and influence. In both

cases, rugged individualism becomes an ideology primarily used to enforce social injustice.<sup>18</sup> For by appealing to the notion that the strongest will rise to the top and that the individuals worth in society is dependent entirely on his or her ability to overcome all obstacles in pursuit of economic success, social injustice is sanctioned. Those who hold the conviction of the rugged individualist look at those who are less fortunate and capable with contempt or pity or as mere reminders of how far one can sink. A final irony follows from Borgmann's analysis, and it rests with the failed and exhausted individualist: if he or she fails irredeemably, he or she can only scorn or pity him or herself.

Both rugged and commodious individualists place the individual above society. But, whereas the rugged individualist is determined to supersede society in his or her achievements, the commodious individualist is intent on ignoring traditional morality and on living what he or she takes to be the most satisfying private life.<sup>19</sup> The role of the commodious individualist is, therefore, that of a consumer. The technological culture provides a wide array of products from which the commodious individualist can choose, but it is finally the individual's choice regarding the kind and quality of enjoyment he or she attains. The commodious individualist is free and encouraged to glamorize him or herself and to promote and satisfy any and all desires. In the United States, at least, the individual consumer has been freed to a great extent from the restrictions of common morality by judicial legislation and general cultural disregard.<sup>20</sup>

Part of the allure of private consumption in modern technological societies stems from the media and its presentation of models for the consumer to attain to. The media generally and generously portray the lives of the rich, the chic, and the famous. Since the rich, the chic, and the famous justify their consumption by appeal to their own rugged individualism and since this conspicuous consumption and its justification are accepted by the population at large, individualism and its entailed form of social injustice receives a general and forceful sanction from the population, especially in the United States. For, at the very least, those who cannot share the privileged status of consumption aspire to it.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, many will ask "What is wrong with individual consumption?" Ultimately, the problem lies with the disconnection from real things and people, from politics and meaningful labour, and from one's own best human nature. The consumer who yearns for the glamour of a magazine or who watches T.V. several hours a night is disengaged from reality, simply. This may not seem so bad in itself-- after all, reality is not always pleasant. Yet, it is doubtful that the life of consumption is satisfying in the long run. If one accepts the notion that people are truly at their best when engaged with other people or things, the poverty of spirit which marks so much of contemporary cultural life in the United States becomes apparent.

#### iv. Ralph

Young Yifeng lands in the United States with little except for his desire to succeed in order to bring honour to his family. He comes from a "place where every noise has a known source" (5). He is astounded and overwhelmed by the country:

He wondered at roller coasters. At Ferris wheels. At cafeterias-- eating factories, these seemed to him, most advanced and efficient, especially the Automats with their machines lit bright as a stage... Nothing was made of bamboo (8).

He becomes "Hutu" (16) or confused due to his infatuation with Cammy. He has trouble staying on course. With the collapse of the Nationalist government, he is lost. In his desultory condition he "gave himself up to the country, and dreamt." For he concludes that "[a]nything could happen, this was America" (42).

After his "deliverance" (43) resulting from his encounter with Theresa and his ensuing marriage to Helen, Ralph eventually finds his focus and completes his degree. But, during this period he also grows in his adaptation to American life. Professor Pierce gives him a copy of the *Power of Positive Thinking*, and Ralph puts the teachings to memory. Ralph decides:

He could do anything! It was a matter of faith; and of imagination, a thing Ralph had never considered before (88).

Ralph absorbs these seeds of individualism; his destiny, his life, and his labor are in his hands only. Thus, when Grover comes along with his teachings and examples of success, Ralph already understands the essentials of the doctrine. Ralph can respond to Grover's litany of individualism with his own chorus: "Positive attitude, right? Use Imagination?" And Grover can easily reply: "You got it" (107).

With Grover's examples and teachings Ralph waits for his opportunity. But in the meantime, Ralph rationalizes his new ideology, and it becomes "a matter of faith, like going to church..."(113).

Ralph's new faith marks a deep and subtle transformation of his character. Jen recognizes as much and writes about it poignantly:

In China, people had worried more about being recognized ... Who we are being so many hard facts held like candies or coins, just up one's sleeve-- one's father, one's mother, all things that might quaintly be termed one's station. This was useful information in a terraced society. How should people treat

each other? How expect to be treated? In close quarters, relationships count so heavily that to say something has no relationship- - *mei guanxi* -- is to mean, often as not, it doesn't matter. In spread out American, though, this loose-knit country, where one could do as one pleased, a person had need of a different understanding... (177,178).

Ralph learns that in America one must know one's self, not one's role, and one must make oneself, not be made. These two axioms of individualism seem to allow any and all possibilities for Ralph. After all, he is the creator and the created, the director and the directed. This freedom of the individual to overcome traditional limitations is the implicit hope of the Lockean project. Ralph, thus, comes to a personal understanding of one of the most fundamental aspects of American cultural life. Ironically, it is the traditional pressures of his family that give him the impetus to utilize his understanding and to launch out into his own rugged capitalist venture.

Storace notes his competition with his older sister. Jen also shows explicitly how Ralph is haunted by his father's influence: "All he could think of, as he headed back, was what his father used to say about people lost in narrow, dead-end specialities-- that they had crawled into the tip of a bull's horn" (181). As a tenured professor of mechanical engineering Ralph feels himself in the tip of a bull's horn; he does not want to be limited; he wants to be someone special, someone significant.

One evening while driving home from work with his car top stuck down in the pouring rain, Ralph has his knowledge confirmed by revelation. He clearly perceives the struggles of Americans:

So much ambition! No equation could begin to describe it all. So many people, aiming to do so many things besides lecture about crack stress to blinking undergraduates ... The greatness of America! he thought. Freedom and justice for all (182, 183).

He perceives the freedom as never before, and he feels himself pulled into the competition in order to overcome his sister and his father and to assert his own identity as a self-made man. The freedom, in this case, is his freedom to pursue his fortune, to engage his labor, and to claim victory as an individual achiever. The justice rests with his belief that the strong will survive, and that, because anything is possible in America, anyone can become strong and prosper. With his vision of freedom and justice clarified, the fire of desire is lit in Ralph.

Ralph soon returns to Grover. Grover takes Ralph under his wing and sells him on the prospects of great success. But the actual venture is dubious, and it is designed to serve Grover's ends. Despite this fact, Grover is successful in selling his scheme to Ralph because Ralph is ready to deal, ready to achieve. Grover sees a sucker and states: "I think, that business ... could be the start of a real success story. This could be the start



of a self-made man" (193). Foolishly and tragically, Ralph is ready and willing to listen and to act.

Despite the fact that Theresa realizes that Grover is "liar and a cheat" (194), Ralph becomes "all blind focus" (218) in his pursuit of profit. The business opens, and it becomes successful-- due in no small measure to the under reporting of receipts. Helen is able to purchase her suburban home. But, Ralph wants more. He envisions even greater profits, and he returns to the rhetoric of heroic individualism to overrule Grover's sound objections to his plan to add a second floor to the restaurant: "Fools say impossible. Wise men think, how" (219).

Ralph is a driven individualist, rugged in temperament and ambition. But in his drive he becomes so cut off from his own family that Helen can have an affair with his business partner in the room above him without his knowledge. He is so driven and so cut off that he can not see Grover as the con man that he is. He is so driven that he can not perceive the folly of his own dreams and the reality of his own limitations. Finally, he is so driven that he becomes separate from his family, his culture, and his virtues.

## Helen

Helen grows up a favourite of her brothers and sisters in Shanghai. "Her life ambition was to stay home forever" (61). Of course, she knows that her life in her father's home will be short lived, that at best "she would be sent to scratch out some new, poor spot for herself, at the edge of a strange world, separated from everyone she loved as though by a violent, black ocean" (62). Perhaps because of this reason as a girl Helen is "instinctively careful not to take up too much space" (56). She lives her life sensitive to the changing moods and needs of others:

... Helen was not a listener either, so much as something else. Attentive. She sensed when a guest needed more tea before the guest did, expressed herself by filling his cup, thought in terms of matching, balancing, connecting, completing (56).

In order to act in such a manner a person, of course, needs a family, a community, or a group in which to be both connected and connecting. Helen is raised to be a traditional daughter-- a good daughter whom people do not gossip about. But when she arrives in America these traits are confronted and challenged. She needs to study English, but "she studied the way she walked too, lightly -- why should she struggle with English" (62).

But, like Ralph and Theresa, Helen has to adjust. It is a new and extreme situation. She has a family, but it is small, nowhere can she find aunts and uncles and children and grandparents. She is isolated in a way she never prepared for. But, "eventually, faith

faltering" (63) Helen finds something of herself, a sense of self reliance and aptitude for work which she never knew before:

Helen studied harder, walked more, bought new clothes, wrote her parents less ... she also developed a liking for American magazines, American newspapers, American radio (63).

Unlike Ralph's, her adaptation to her circumstances is a forced and quiet one. She must establish herself, for nothing is established for her. Nonetheless, she does not shrink from her new self, and she acknowledges the changes she is undergoing:

She couldn't help but feel proud. Too proud, really-- she tried to bind that feeling up-- recognizing still, though, that in her own way she was becoming private strength itself ... And all because she'd discovered by herself, a secrete-- that working was enjoyable. Effort, result (76).

Helen discovers herself. She is capable of engaging her labour, of producing, and of creating without the restrictions of family and community. She, like Ralph, is liberated in the Lockean sense. Her kinship group has dissolved, but she remains.

Yet, at the very moment of her personal liberation, Helen confronts the darker side of her individualism, namely the private allure of commodities:

Without Theresa and Ralph knowing, she spent large parts of her afternoons listening to the radio, or reading the magazines she kept under the mattress. She loved the advertisements ... (77).

Like Ralph, it takes Helen's new sense of self time to develop fully. Ralph achieves his Ph.D. She gives birth and remains "a fixed center" (105) in the household. But, more and more she begins to perceive herself "as though in a magazine" (116). Her relationship with her husband takes on a romantic air, unlike a marriage in China at the time.

... [S]he saw herself wildly in love. He lived for her, only for her. And in her dreams she lived for him too, this man her parents would never have picked (116).

Her connection with her past self becomes more tenuous. And, her model for her new self centers on the image of the beautiful housewife who lives a romantic life with her husband in a suburban home full of appliances, love seats, and glamour.

As Helen seeks her dream, she comes to know "traditional from contemporary, split level from ranch from center-entrance Colonial. Tudors, bungalows, A-frames ... Stucco, brick, shingle, clapboard" (137). She suggests to Ralph that she should work to help save

money for the home. Despite the fact that "Ralph was shocked" (137), she has her own sense of a rugged self in pursuit of the commodious life. Eventually, the family pools its resources and makes a down payment on a new home.

There remains, however, problem with the new condition. Theresa is eventually shut out of the enjoyment and celebration because of her affair, although she contributes to the financial arrangement. Ralph renews his relationship with Grover. And, Helen is caught in her own dream. The family begins to split apart. Helen "might have likened their family to astronauts, floating in space" (115). The collective sense of connection and determination gives way to individual preferences and desires. Helen tries to center the family in the home. But, eventually, Theresa is forced to leave when Ralph comes home drunk and publicly denounces her perceived improbity.

With Ralph ringing up the register receipts and Theresa gone, Helen soon is alone in her dreams. Grover perceives her condition, as he did Ralph's, and he seduces her.

She felt herself become someone else, someone much prettier. A commanding presence. What power in pliancy! If only her husband weren't her husband to think of, right underfoot, at most six feet away (215).

Helen gives herself over to the affair, and the center collapses. Helen is now truly in a magazine. She is leading a glamorous life, no longer connected to her family as before. She is lost in the free, amoral space of consumption. Her reconnection to the family, to reality, will only come by the price of sacrifice and tragedy.

## The Tragedy

When the chicken restaurant collapses, Ralph, as a true individualist, has only himself to blame. But, before he fully realizes this, he sulks, and he looks for a scapegoat. He lashes out at Helen: "What we can't afford... is this house of yours" (260). Fighting breaks out between the two. Helen is launched out the window, but "miraculously, Helen had not broken anything" (264). It seems as though the family and the suburban dream will be broken. But, Theresa answers Helen's call and comes home. Her financial power, an indignity as far as Ralph is concerned, is sufficient to keep the household economy stable:

It was her duty, she told herself. She was in many ways Americanized, but in this respect she was Chinese still-- when the family marched, she fell in step (265).

When Old Chao calls for extended visits with Theresa, however, Ralph feels compelled to hide himself in his bedroom or to go on long walks with his dog. He muses over Theresa's new stature, at having to ask Old Chao for his job, and at the treachery

of Grover. During one of his walks, Ralph finally encounters Grover, but Grover simply taunts him. Ralph is reduced to impotence when Grover reveals his affair with Helen. He cannot strike; he has only himself to blame. He is a self-made man who can not make it, after all. And Grover's "gold tooth gleamed out from his dark face" (274).

After Theresa goes into a prolonged coma, Ralph and Helen must face the tragedy of their lives. Although neither Helen nor Ralph can be considered great heroes in the Aristotelian sense, both of them embody character flaws which precipitate their disaster. They are both guilty of a general unease and dissatisfaction with their lives. And, they are unable to maintain their virtues in a solid and determined way in the face of the new culture.

The Changs are not bad people, however. Their choices are, of course, ultimately guided and sanctioned by the new society in which they live. Perhaps only extraordinary effort can overcome the forces at work in their lives. Thus, the tragedy becomes more poignant. They make natural and acceptable decision, but these decisions bring their demise. They believe they can redefine themselves and overcome their limitations, but their limitations only become more apparent as they face their own loss.

When looking back at themselves, Jen notes that:

They might or might not have counted themselves happy, though; happiness as they conceived it was a thing attained, a grand state, involving a fiefdom to survey from the plump comfort of their dotage. It was only in retrospect that they came to call plain heartsease a happiness too... (124).

Their fiefdom (the chicken palace and the suburban home) never allows them "heartsease" or contentment, even from its heights. And with the fiefdom's collapse, Ralph and Helen realize more fully their condition and what really matters to them. Helen gives up her house, her dream, for an apartment and a chance to sit by Theresa's contorted side. Ralph returns to his professorship. They still wonder at America, though. But, Theresa's lingering condition forces them to wonder more deeply and clearly:

Was death possible in this bright country? It was, they knew. Of course. And yet, they began to realize that in the fiber of their beings they had almost believed it a thing they left behind, like rickshaws(286).

Helen keeps the girls on a vigil at Theresa's side. Through this vigil Helen reestablishes her connection with the family; she no longer allows herself to drift away, no matter how unpleasant reality may be. Helen is expressing herself again in connection with others. Helen's *catharsis* is arrived at through action, through her return to her family and her role. Perhaps it is this reconnection which Theresa ultimately responds to.

Ralph, however, is given to introspection. And when Helen calls him with the news that Theresa has made some moaning sounds, Ralph's reflections reveal the true circum-

stances of America:

It seemed to him at that moment, as he stood waiting and waiting, trapped in his coat, that a man was as doomed here as he was in China. *Kan bu jian. Ting bu jian.* He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America. Ralph swallowed (296).

Ralph experiences his own *catharsis*. He no longer yearns for a self beyond what he is. For all his attempts at creation, Ralph knows he is created, but not by himself only. He is a product of his environment, his ability, and his decisions. He cannot overcome all obstacles with hard work and a positive attitude. He is purged of his old self; he is ready to carry on as best he can in the life he is granted.

Thus, although Ralph and Helen come to embody individualism in their struggle to achieve their new cultural identities, it is only through their failure and their return to their sense of family, with all its attendant obligations and limits, that Ralph and Helen, and perhaps someday Theresa, come to be truly and ironically "Typical Americans."

## Endnotes

1. Janice C. Simpson, "Fresh Voices Above the Noisy Dim: New Works by Four Chinese-American Writers Splendidly Illustrate the Frustrations, Humor and Eternal Wonder of the Immigrant's Life," *Time* 6 June 1991: 66.
2. See "Making It in America," *Asiaweek* 1 Nov. 1991:34-41, and Winnie Chang, "No Longer Silent," *Free China Review* Dec. 1991: 4-25.
3. Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992) 37-47, 55-57.
4. All quotes are from Gish Jen, *Typical American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Seymour Lawrence, 1991).
5. Phoebe Lou-Adams, rev. of *Typical American*, by Gish Jen, *Atlantic* April 1991: 108.
6. A.G. Mojtabai, "The Complete Other-Side of The World," rev. of *Typical American*, by Gish Jen, *The New York Times Book Review* 31 March 1991: 9.
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